

Transcript for Oral History of Barbra Wood

Transcribed by: Isabella Rieger

Interviewer: Isabella Rieger

Interviewee: Barbra Wood

Location: Glickman Family Library

Date: November 16 2017

Isabella: Hello um today's date is November 16 2017 and I am here with Barbra Wood--Um Barbra if you would just spell you name for us

Barbra: Sure it's B-a-r-b-r-a W-o-o-d, No S

Isabella: *Laughs*

Isabella: And interviewing is Isabella Rieger I-s-a-b-e-l-l-a R-i-e-g-e-r and first things first, just want to let you know that at any point in the interview that you want to stop or want to take a break or a question that you'd prefer not to answer you are completely at liberty to do that. We are here because you are giving us your time and story--so you really are directing the ship for us. So anything you don't want to answer you don't have to.

Barbra: Sure I understand

Isabella: Wonderful. Alright so, first thing I want to ask you is, if you remember the time that you just kind of thought to yourself, like "hey maybe I don't like guys", or like, "maybe I'm not heterosexual." I don't know that we'd think of that--like "I'M NOT HETEROSEXUAL" more like "maybe I'm not interested in guys". But can you tell me a little bit about that experience?

Barbra: Well um, I would say that in high school I had a bestfriend who I felt very um very close to. in a way that that was intense and I don't..at the time I just thought she was just a really good friend and a friend that I was more friendly with *laughs* than other people. She was obviously very straight but she was the first person I came out to when I found out what was going on. Um, and she and I have remained good friends our entire life but it was interesting because her mother at one point sort of asked her I think what was going on. and her mother also said that she had asked her older brother at one point what was going on with him and a close friend. and none of those people turned out being gay. um I am the only one. But, I say that just because you know in hindsight, it's it's um, there was probably something there that I just didn't understand. Um, but then I went off to college and once again there was another student who was actually a couple years younger than me and we did a lot of partying back in those days and um, you know once again it was, I developed a very close friendship with her and one night after a party we were back at her apartment and unbenounced to me she had hahd experiences with women and I had not

Isabella: Ahh--

Barbra: and at one point as we were staying up till four in the morning talking

Isabella: Right

Barbra: She kept saying that she liked me and I kept saying 'ehh I like you too'

Isabella: *laughs*

Barbara: And she said "no no you don't understand, I really like you". And then she said " I really want to kiss you" and I said--"sure, why not" still not a hundred percent and uh she kissed me and that kiss was that was it! That was it!

Isabella: Ohhhh *laughing*

Barbra: And I had been with boys in highschool um and a little bit in college but never had a long term relationship with boys. But yet again, even to this day, some of my closest friendships are with me. I mean I like men a lot and were--we we do a bonding thing but it's not in any way sexual or I'm attracted to them in a sexual-romantic way. I'd say I have a few guys I've worked with..I mean we kid about we're married or we're actually divorced but friends and bicker like a married couple. But that that was what it was--Helen Schlagel.

Isabella: Aw, HELEN--what was Helen like?

Barbra: Oh she was probably a jerk

Both laugh

Barbra: We had a very odd relationship through the rest of college where she'd want to be together and then she wouldn't and it was very hurtful to me.

Isabella: Aww yeah...

Barbra: I think she was probably was also seeing other women

Isabella: Right

Barbra: Like I said there was a lot of partying in college and uh--so that didn't really materialize but once again I still am in touch with her. Not like we're good friends but once a year we call each other on our birthday that kind of thing.

Isabella: Yeah I can see that sharing that really powerful first experience--you know

Barbra: Right, right. So that was my

Isabella: Yeah

Barbra: That was my when I figured it out story.

Isabella: Cool. And what time were you in college--like what year.

Barbra: I was a--was I a junior or senior. I could figure it out if you gave me a minute.

Isabella: Yeah that'd be awesome

Barbra:*laughing* Well actually I know that it was March first.

Isabella: OOH! We even get a date!

Barbra: Yeah I'm kind of a weirdo when it comes to dates and rituals and traditions.

Isabella: Aw, I love that.

Barbra: So wait a minute, I went to school in 1972 and I graduated in 76 and the night, March first 1975--so I would've been a junior. and I particularly remember that date because my highschool friends were coming to visit because it was my friend's Sandy's 21st birthday on March first

[00:00:00.00] Isabella: Hello um today's date is November 16 2017 and I am here with Barbra Wood--Um Barbra if you would just spell you name for us

Barbra: Sure it's B-a-r-b-r-a W-o-o-d, No S

Isabella: *Laughs*

Isabella: And interviewing is Isabella Rieger I-s-a-b-e-l-l-a R-i-e-g-e-r and first things first, just want to let you know that at any point in the interview that you want to stop or want to take a break or a question that you'd prefer not to answer you are completely at liberty to do that. We are here because you are giving us your time and story--so you really are directing the ship for us. So anything you don't want to answer you don't have to.

Barbra: Sure I understand

Isabella: Wonderful. Alright so, first thing I want to ask you is, if you remember the time that you just

kind of thought to yourself, like "hey maybe I don't like guys", or like, "maybe I'm not heterosexual." I don't know that we'd think of that--like "I'M NOT HETEROSEXUAL" more like "maybe I'm not interested in guys". But can you tell me a little bit about that experience?

Barbra: Well um, I would say that in high school I had a bestfriend who I felt very um very close to in a way that that was intense and I don't..at the time I just thought she was just a really good friend and a friend that I was more friendly with *laughs* than other people. She was obviously very straight but she was the first person I came out to when I found out what was going on. Um, and she and I have remained good friends our entire life but it was interesting because her mother at one point sort of asked her I think what was going on. and her mother also said that she had asked her older brother at one point what was going on with him and a close friend. and none of those people turned out being gay. um I am the only one. But, I say that just because you know in hindsight, it's it's um, there was probably something there that I just didn't understand. Um, but then I went off to college and once again there was another student who was actually a couple years younger than me and we did a lot of partying back in those days and um, you know once again it was, I developed a very close friendship with her and one night after a party we were back at her apartment and unbenounced to me she had had experiences with women and I had not

Isabella: Ahh--

Barbra: and at one point as we were staying up till four in the morning talking

Isabella: Right

Barbra: She kept saying that she liked me and I kept saying 'ehh I like you too'

Isabella: *laughs*

Barbara: And she said "no no you don't understand, I really like you". And then she said "I really want to kiss you" and I said--"sure, why not" still not a hundred percent and uh she kissed me and that kiss was that was it! That was it!

Isabella: Ohhhh *laughing*

Barbra: And I had been with boys in highschool um and a little bit in college but never had a long term relationship with boys. But yet again, even to this day, some of my closest friendships are with me. I mean I like men a lot and were--we we do a bonding thing but it's not in any way sexual or I'm attracted to them in a sexual-romantic way. I'd say I have a few guys I've worked with..I mean we kid about we're married or we're actually divorced but friends and bicker like a married couple. But that that was what it was--Helen Schlagel.

Isabella: Aw, HELEN--what was Helen like?

Barbra: Oh she was probably a jerk

Both laugh

Barbra: We had a very odd relationship through the rest of college where she'd want to be together and then she wouldn't and it was very hurtful to me.

Isabella: Aww yeah...

Barbra: I think she was probably was also seeing other women

Isabella: Right

Barbra: Like I said there was a lot of partying in college and uh--so that didn't really materialize but once again I still am in touch with her. Not like we're good friends but once a year we call each other on our birthday that kind of thing.

Isabella: Yeah I can see that sharing that really powerful first experience--you know

Barbra: Right, right. So that was my

Isabella: Yeah

Barbra: That was my when I figured it out story.

Isabella: Cool. And what time were you in college--like what year.

Barbra: I was a--was I a junior or senior. I could figure it out if you gave me a minute.

Isabella: Yeah that'd be awesome

Barbra: *laughing* Well actually I know that it was March first.

Isabella: OOH! We even get a date!

Barbra: Yeah I'm kind of a weirdo when it comes to dates and rituals and traditions.

Isabella: Aw, I love that.

Barbra: So wait a minute, I went to school in 1972 and I graduated in '76 and the night, March first 1975--so I would've been a junior. and I particularly remember that date because my highschool friends were coming to visit because it was my friend's Sandy's 21st birthday on March first

Isabella: A-ha!

Barbra: So a car full of highschool friends were coming to visit for Sandy to celebrate her 21st birthday. So I have always known to the point that I've had parties on March 1st--I actually rented the Holiday Inn

Isabella: Oh Yeah!

Barbra: In 1990 for my 15th anniversary being a lesbian and I had a hundred or so people for a dance party at the holiday inn.

Isabella: Aw that is so cool!

Barbra: Now it's a little quieter. Now my partner and I usually go out to dinner

Isabella: Right *giggles*

Barbra: But we always in some way recognize the date of March 1st.

Isabella: Yeah! The queer anniversary that's beautiful--that's really really cool. What a wonderful ritual that is. That's awesome.

Barbra: Yes

Isabella: Yeah, were you originally attracted to Helen or was it just this sort of surprise thing?

Barbra: WELL once again it was just like my highschool friend Jamie. I didn't view it as a physical attraction until that kiss happened but it was an intense closeness--like I wanted to spend all my time with them uhh--

Isabella: *Laughing* YUP

Barbra: You know we did a lot of things together. i mean Jamie and I played tennis everyday we, we, just hung out. Um

Isabella: Yeah

Barbra: Helen, I don't know--we were in college and--I keep going back to the parties. In college we had a lot of parties

Isabella: *laughs* Yes, 70's parties

Barbra: Oh yeah, yeah. An um, you know Helen was always there and I was always there and we were always connecting but I really didn't figure it out until that first kiss.

Isabella: So who was your first crush that you were like "Oh I have a crush on this woman--that you recognized as a crush"

Barbra: OH YOU MEAN LIKE BETTE MIDLER?

Isabella: *Laughs* Do I want to be her? Do I love her? I don't know..

Barbra: *laughs* Who was my first crush? Hmm I don't know. I mean I think that after Helen and I--you know like I said. She was in no way wanting to be in a relationship or committed in any way but i think I wanted that so---you know I don't know--what's the definition of a crush? I ,mean I sort of followed her around and

Isabella: Yeah---

Barbra: And tried to make some things happen that didn't really happen

Isabella: Yeeuh

Barbra: But uh, I don't know I can't think of you know, other than famous people crushes--

Isabella: Right

Barbra: Kate Jackson from the Charlie's Angels.

Isabella: OOOh Nice! *laughs* Very cool against the grain--not Ferrah

Barbra: Yes, yes exactly!

Isabella: I like that

Barbra: The smart one!

Isabella: Exactly--there we go *laughs*

Barbra: *laughing*

Isabella: Well that's really wonderful--um when did you meet your current partner?

Barbra: I ,get my current partner--well we had our twelfth anniversary this past summer but that was sort of interesting in that um, you know I 've also sort of said or heard other people say that you don't meet your partner in a bar--

Isabella: Mhmm

Barbra: But I happen to have met my partner in a bar. There used to be a group of women that got --you know 13 14 years ago that a group of women on the last friday of the month would take over a bar--you know after work--happy hour--all the lesbans go. There's a thing that goes on now---the queer guerilla bar where it's a different place every month but this was a bar where two lesbians had talked to the owner and said they wanted to do this and the owner would put out a little bit of food--not a lot, but a little bit, and we would all show up there. After a while that place closed and we went to another place that didn't last as long---but anyway

Isabella: Right

Barbra: So I would go. I was single. I'd been single for a while and i would go there the last friday of the month--big group of people. I'd go with friends I'd go by myself--there were always people there I knew and there was a woman there that i had seen her around town off and on--and always had thought she was very attractive and uh

Isabella: Those Charlie's Angels feelings

Barbra: Yeah--actually. She looks a little like Kate Jackson but with Farrah Fawcett hair

Isabella: Oooow--*laughing* love it!

Barbra: Anyway she--we ended up at one of the nights sitting beside each other at the bar and she had ordered an appetizer and I'm a food person

Isabella: *laughs*

Barbra: So I guess I was staring at her food and I guess she asked me if I wanted a bite--

Isabella: ooh lala

Barbra: And I was like oh yeah I'd love to have a bite--and we--so we got into conversation and we had a really nice conversation and the time I smoked and i went outside for a cigarette and she would smoke if

she had a drink or two--so she came out and bummed a cigarette and that was sort of that and the following month she wasn't there. and she was pretty much there every month and the following month she wasn't there

Isabella: Awww

Barbra: So I was really bummed out and I didn't know her last name the only way I knew to get in touch with her would've been through an ex--who was still trying to get back with her---

Isabella: *laughs* classic Portland

Barbra: Oh yeah, yeah...So I'm like well I can't ask her for her number so--I had to wait another month. So the following month she was there and I was there across the crowded room--my sort of signal to her was let's have a cigarette.

Isabella: Oh lala

Barbra: We went and had a cigarette and exchanged names, we exchanged numbers and that was sort of it.

Isabella: That was the blossoming of your romance

Barbra: Yeah...it was good.

Isabella: That's awesome and here you are 12 years later

Barbra: Yes!

Isabella: That's fantastic

Barbra: It really is

Isabella: So cool. Yeah, so I know that um in this little blurb you wrote up for Wendy

Barbra: Yes

Isabella: You said that getting together with your first girlfriend was sort of your initiation into wanting to be politically active and i was wondering what about that experience inspired you to get politically active?

Barbra: So let me just ask a clarifying question--there's something in there I said that made it sound like your first girlfriend made me want to be politically active

Isabella: Yeahh--

Barbra: Let's check that out--I have a feeling I know what you're thinking about

Isabella: Ahhh--

Barbra: What? What did I say?

Isabella: it says " I came out to my girlfriend in Pennsylvania while in college...

Barbra: Okay

Isabella: In the mid 80's it moved--ahh.

Barbra: Ahh gotcha--yeah so, so my political activism--I was not politically active at all ever and I moved to Maine--well first I came to maine to come to graduate school. But then I couldn't find a job so I moved back to Pennsylvania. But I just loved Maine and I wanted to come back and I eventually had my company transfer me back to Maine. but my company was an insurance company. I did commercial property inspections for this company. An my territory when I got transferred was the state of Maine. So I travelled the state of maine every day which was fabulous looking at different commercial businesses and it was very lonely and i 'm a pretty social person. So I lived in an apartment in Sebago Lake Village
*laughing*and uh

Isabella: Known for its social experiences

Barbra: *laughing* Yes exactly--I didn't know anybody. I did have a friend from undergrad that ended up in Main and she lived in Norridge Block um--which is between Waterville and Skowhegan um once again

not exactly--BUT ANYWAY she knew her way a little bit around the Portland area and she had told me that she knows that there was a gay bar in Portland.

Isabella: SCORE!

Barbra: And she told me the name of it--she didn't know much else about it--I don't know if she'd even been to it but she knew about it.

Isabella: What's the name of the bar?

Barbra: Well it was the Underground--later known as Styxx--and recently closed. That's another story I can tell about the closing.

Isabella: We'll come back to it

Barbra: Okay. but anyway, so I worked and on Fridays I would--when I finished work I'd go to the Underground around happy hour--sorta the end of my work day and I would go have a drink and at 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon there really weren't a lot of people at the Underground. So I would sit at the bar and talk to the bartender and I discovered on a table a newspaper on the table called "Our Paper" which was the Maine gay newspaper at the time. So I'd sit there and have a drink and read the paper. And the the end of the paper there was a little blurb that the paper needed volunteers--and I was like, wow, is that something I could do? Just to meet people! Just to have a social life! And so I volunteered and I went--and there were weekly meetings at Our Books which was a gay bookstore in town and um--I started going--Excuse me I just need some water

Isabella: Oh of course.

Barbra: So I went to volunteer for the newspaper and I wasn't a writer--I hate to write, and I sort of wasn't even--didn't know anything about gay community or culture...

Isabella: The things we do for friends.

Barbra: Right, exactly. So--BUT I drove all over the state for my job. So I became in charge of distribution because we had the newspapers printed in Brunswick at the Brunswick Times Record and they had the to be picked up and then they had to be driven around to different libraries, colleges--places where there were other gay bookstores in the state. And I would--while I was working I'd take em around and drop em off. AND I also became involved in collections--which is where I met one of my best friends no--currently--who had placed an ad--you had to pay for your ad--that's how we payed for the paper and this particular person never paid for her ad. And so I was sent to bang on her door and get GET OUR MONEY!

Isabella: *Laughing*

Barbara: And now she lives across the street from me and we're in some financial partnerships together and I make sure she pays her bills on time *laughs*

Isabella: Nice

Barbra: But where was I going--what was I talking about here?

Isabella: You were talking about the Our Paper

Barbra: Oh right--me becoming kind of political and so that newspaper and the people that worked on the newspaper were really in my opinio the movers and shakers in the gay community in Maine.

Isabella: Right

Barbara: And I say "gay" community and not LGBT because back then that really was the lingo--and it was only sort of the DIE HARD FEMINISTS LESBIANS that said---"YOU HAVE TO SAY LESBIAN" and I'm like "I'm not going to say lesbian--we're all GAY" and actually at USM um was the gay people's alliance at the time--which I also saw an ad in the newspaper for and met---well those were mostly

women even thought it was called the "Gay People's Alliance"--actually it was probably all women um--and I did a lot of social activities with those people. It is interesting--I did not maintain friendships with that group of people

Isabella: Interesting.

Barbra: Um--but every now and then one of them pops up on facebook and we'll have a little exchange but, you know it was mostly college students and I wasn't

Isabella: So you were a little older at the time?

Barbra: And I had moved away

Isabella: Yup

Barbra: So those were sort of my initial two things, Our Paper meetings and the we called it the Lesbian support slash discussion group. But we did a lot of social activities and had potlucks. Went to the beach in the summer..so that was sort of how I was starting to meet people being that I had a job where I didn't work with anybody. The newspaper really, I mean, I think one of the most important and powerful women in the state of Maine at the time ws Dianne Ellsie--who was very important part of the newspaper and we're still good friends--although she lives in Buffalo NY now--but there's a group of us that vacation together every summer in Provincetown.

Isabella: Still?

Barbra: there used to be like 18 of us and people have moved away. Dianne is in Buffalo, Linda is in Tucson um Sue, Shannon and Leslie are in Connecticut but everybody knows the third week in July we're going to be in Provincetown and if they can they come. Some years it might only be five people other years it might be 15 but we've been doing that for a very long time.

Isabella: Talk about romantic friendship

Barbra: Yeah--so anyway, Dianne Ellsie, Fredburger owned the bookstore and he had actually run for city council, um once or twice and not been elected but ran as an openly gay man which in the 80's was a big deal.

Isabella: Yeah--

Barbra: I met Tom Sumner who was sort of like my first gay male friend and he and I loved to go to Woodsford Cafe and have tea and coffee and um just yack ad i knew nothing about the gay male world. Phil Gautreau was there he graduated from USM and left and now lives in NYC and whenever I go to the city I usually stay with him. She wasn't part of the Our Paper Collective but Dale McCormick used to sometimes come on the night we laid out the paper--because that was a long night back before computers when you had to lay out a newspaper and she would come out and help sometimes. So I met her there--I'm just naming names. Mary Cue

Isabella: No, no it's great.

Barbra: Who went on to buy the Falmouth Forecaster. As a journalist I met her at Our Paper. She has since sold the forecaster it's not the Falmouth Forecaster anymore it's the Forecaster--but she still writes a political column for them. Um so there were political people there that I started going--hm this is interesting. The year that I started going is also the same year Charlie Howard was murdered. I happened to be out of state when that happened--so i missed--there was a lot of activism that week or weekend and I know there was a big march which people from Our Paper were very much apart of. And I missed all that. I came back to find out about all that. Once again I have never been to a march--

Isabella: Right

Barbra: I didn't know what it was um, but through that, I always think of Dale, who is probably who I talked to about it, but I learned later that there was a group of people--a small group of people that got together and Dale was one of them--that said we--enough is enough and we need to take some political action for what is going on in this state. That was the founding of MLGPA the Maine Lesbian Gay Political Alliance

Isabella: So it stemmed from Charlie's death?

Barbra: Oh yeah--absolutely.

Isabella: Yeah

Barbra: Once again I'm like this little person who doesn't know anything but I'm really good at sort of logistics and driving here and doing this and doing that --so we had our first meeting in Augusta the weekend of the Common Ground Fair because we figured a lot of people would be at the Common Ground Fair, which was not in Unity at the time. It was in Litchfield not too far from Augusta. so we had our first meeting in Augusta and we said--you know we had a good turn out for the meeting and we said this is available organization and we're going to do something here. So the first thing we said we needed to do was a mailing. We got mailing lists from the MCLU which is now the ACLU of Maine but back then it was the MCLU. We got mailing lists from anybody we could get mailing lists and we created a letter and we needed money and so this is another thing. I had this somewhat professional job and had some money in my bank account and we figure we needed about \$500 to do this mailing and everybody was like--how are we going to come up with \$500. I said I raised my hand and said "well I have \$500 in bank account--it was like my life savings

Isabella: WOW

Barbra: But I was like, everybody said listen from the mailing we're going to get money so we will pay you back. So we wrote a document--it wasn't legal or anything but I was like a nervous wreck but I just felt like it was the right thing to do. So that has always stuck with me that I made the first donation to MLGPA, well it wasn't a donation--it was a loan because they paid me back. But that was my big contribution. By this point I had a big apartment in downtown Portland and we set up a bunch of tables

Isabella: WoW

Barbra: and I told my roommates listen this is going to be happening for a week or two. I mean people would just come to the apartment for an hour and stuff envelopes

Isabella: Like an office

Barbra: Yeah.

Isabella: Headquarters

Barbra: Yeah yeah! So that was my apartment was conducive to gatherings--it was pretty big. So we did the first mailing, got money, we started doing stuff. And we started doing things in Augusta--the history of MLGPA we could go on and on about that. I mean Dale and I did the first lobby day and neither one of had ever lobbied. She ended up being state senator, and state treasurer and I was the first [openly lesbian] elected official on the Portland City Council. Once again, we didn't know what we were doing *laughs* you know Dale would say--when I decided to run, she said "I bought a book. and the book is going to show us how to do a campaign" and we did! We got the book out and okay what do we do now--so yeah, so I always think back to those Fridays sitting at the Underground---there weren't that many but you know a few Fridays, sitting by myself having a drink and reading Our Paper and then seeing that ad for volunteers and changed my life. I mean I was never politically active before, never had that on my radar as something I wanted to do. And now it's one of the biggest parts of my life and not necessarily electoral

politics but just community politics. Just for the record I mean eventually MLGPA turned into Equality Maine. Which I liked tradition--I didn't want to change the name *laughing*

Isabella: THE HISTORY

Barbra: I wanted Lesbian and Gay in there--but we were convinced that as other states as other states were creating statewide groups and getting things done, it was massequality--I mean all the states were going that route and I'm fine with it now. But I was the hold out for changing the name.

Isabella: Well it sounds like The Underground, maybe even your apartment even

Barbra: Yeah

Isabella: Were these queer spaces--that allowed you to plant those seeds that blossomed into this activism this coalition building.

Barbra: Yes absolutely Isabella: And in Portland now do you feel an absence of queer space?

Barbra: Well I was on a panel and I liked to figure out what year that was--and maybe Wendy can help me figure it out because she was on--she was the moderator on a panel I was on at USM--it was before Carol so more than 12 years ago--I think it was before Carol. *Laughs* I was on a panel here and the thing I talked about in my little blurb was um, which a lot of people said they really liked uh was that when I came here and we started to get organized as a political community um, part of what we were fighting for was to be accepted. And to be assimilated into the culture--the general culture and by the time this panel had happened. When this panel happened I thought we did a pretty good job meeting that goal but now I question the goal.

Isabella: Yeah!

Barbra: And I have a list of things that I talked about. Back then we had a gay newspaper, we had Our Paper--at the time I don't think the Phoenix was here yet but there was Casco Bay Weekly I believe because I can remember saying--we had a gay newspaper but gay newspaper went defunct partly because the Casco Bay Weekly started covering gay things so it became the norm for Casco Bay Weekly if there was a gay thing going on they'd cover it. Whereas when Our Paper was around that was not the case that any other publication would be covering these things. I mean we had gay bookstores, Feminist bookstores and I mean now we had sections in regular bookstores for gay books. There were gay bars but now it was okay to go to any bar as a lesbian couple and dance and whatever and there were LGBT people there so we didn't have to have our own bar. After a while you started to say "wait a minute, I sort of miss that community of people that we had and events that we had and life you know that we had.

Isabella: Yeah

Barbra: So you know I just say the same thing I said in the paper--it's a double edged sword

Isabella: Yeah

Barbra: that um you miss that community that comes together but at the same time we are, we are I don't know, do you say we're the norm? I mean we're accepted in a way that back then we were not accepted.

Isabella: Yeah, do you feel like there's still more work to do?

Barbra: Oh there's always more work to do

Isabella: Yeah

Barbra: I mean look at racial inequality I mean the they passed the 1964 civil rights act and we have Black Lives Matter now. I mean in Maine we didn't pass the non-discrimination policy in the state until 2005--but yet, so we have the law on the books but there's still discrimination that takes place. So there's always work to be done--but it morphs and it changes and because--I've been on the board of MLGPA and Equality Maine from the beginning since 1984 when Charlie was killed. I had a brief break in the

middle for a few years but I've been on the board--for I don't even know how long. So I am aware of the work that's going on that maybe other people in the community aren't aware of. It's our job to get that word out but we're doing a lot of work with gay youth and you know we're having--I went, in the spring to University of Maine in Farmington where Gia Drew who's our Equality Maine's personal program manager is--not sure what her official title--but she does most of the youth work. You know she does the youth conference at the university twice a year. Because I'm retired now, I was able to go to this one at UMF and I was blown away with how professional it was, how many people from students to teachers to [professors to parents to the president of the university spoke--I mean I am sitting there in the audience going "oh my god. Back in 1984, whoever thought we'd be doing this kind of thing at the university. The reason we still need to do it and I'm going to get choked up, at one point I was sitting beside somebody in the audience, I don't know, we struck up a conversation for a minute and I said something about "oh this is a really good thing" and she said--and then I told her I was on the board of Equality Maine and she said, that organization has saved my child's life.

Isabella: Wow

Barbra: And my family. She was a parent and she started crying and I said "is your child here" and she said no, they couldn't--it wasn't that they couldn't--I forget there was a legitimate reason why her child wasn't there but she was there as a parent to listen and to continue to learn. She said that she did, they did come down to the Equality Community Center in Portland from somewhere near Farmington. There's a therapist's office in the Equality Maine Community Center and you know--it's still a hard hard thing and I will say that a lot of our youth work seems to be moving toward transgender kids. At one point I did have a conversation with an executive director and said "You know I feel like we're doing all this stuff for transgender kids but what about the lesbian and gay kids?" and his response was "you know actually things are never perfect but better for lesbian and gay kids--it's the trans kids that are getting bullied" and I was like "Really? Lesbian and Gay kids are you know feeling safe in school?" and then I said "You know, we're in Portland so it might feel that way in Portland but I just wonder outside of Portland". So when I went to this conference at UMF I mean it was a mix of lesbian, gay and transgender kids--and I think the whole day did a good job at addressing everybody and everybody feeling comfortable being there--which was great.

Isabella: Yeah--how do you feel about that shift on transgender rights?

Barbra: Well I think you know it's an evolution in the movement,

Isabella: Right

Barbra: It's also an evolution for people in the movement--just like I said when I first started to come out I used the word gay. Most places including the University of Southern Maine used only the word 'Gay' People's Alliance, so that was an evolution. When I started to run for office for city council--I had a friend say "you gotta stop just saying gay--you gotta say gay and lesbian" I was like "alright--I'm political now". I think it's the same with transgender it is to learn to accept that this is a group of people that are apart of our community and movement and some people will get there faster than other people but I think we'll all get there. Just like --you know I mean a lot of the Gay movement was about gay men

Isabella: Right

Barbra: And then over time that has changed to--not just about the men.

Isabella: *laughs* Ahhh

Barbra: Now it's women and men and transgender people. I think still think people still have a hard time, including myself, with language.

Isabella: Mhmm

Actually just a few weeks ago, I'm telling a little story because I think it's worth telling

Isabella: Awesome

Barbra: So I'm on the board of the Equality Community center and we were writing up bylaws and I was at a friend's house in Boston reading the draft and somebody had stopped by the apartment who was transgender and we got into a discussion about what is going on in Maine vs Boston and some transgender issues. And I said "i'll give you an example" and I'm sitting there reading these bylaws and I see in the bylaws every place where there's a pronoun it says 'he/she'. So my feedback when i got to my next meeting is it shouldn't say he/she it should say he/she/they. And this person who is listening said "well actually not all transgender people use 'they' as their pronoun, there's many people who use different kinds of language". And I was like "uh I can't put 100 pronouns in here" and they said "well why don't you just say 'they'? Why do you need the 'he' and the 'she'? Just use they." So I go to the next meeting and I'm all proud of myself and particularly the men in the group were like "listen we put he/she because that has become the acceptable way to handle but really? We have to go to 'they'?" And I said "listen. There was a time when women, particularly feminists had to fight to get 'she' in there"

Isabella: Right

Barbra: Because I remember when it was 'he' only and we had to fight to get 'she'. And even though there is no one currently on our board who is transgender right now, we are creating space and we are always are very careful that me make sure we are creating safe space for transgender people--Maine Trans Net has an office in the Equality Community Center and I said "so in our bylaws we need to make sure that our bylaws are as good as we know we are in the center. So in the end we got the 'they' and got rid of the 'he/she', but I had to really push---you know this is what the feminists fought for back in the 70's and still in the 80's is that kind of language and we need to be the leaders. We are the Equality Community Center Board we need to be the leaders in this. So it's just an evolution and in another 20 years transgender people will be much more accepted in language and in community and I don't know what we'll be on to next.

Isabella: Yeah! How do you feel about the queer youth now? Do you feel like they're carrying the beacon?

Barbra:I have to say that there was a period of time where I was not on the board of Equality Maine--MLGPA. Um because I was just busy with work mainly--but every now and then I would do something and I'd be like "where are all the young people?" like how long am I going to be in my sixties and still having to do all this work because it just felt like there wasn't a wave following us and then it happened--you know it just took a little longer.

Isabella: Right

Barbra: I mean I've never studied social norms or like whatever--or like how long it is supposed to take for that wave to come but i really felt it um in 2005 when we finally passed the non-discrimination act. I felt like the difference that time--because how many times did we try to do it?

Isabella: So many times

Barbra: That time, and I actually wasn't that involved on the ground I mean I gave money, um and wisdom but I didn't have time to be very active, but the little time I was active in meetings or even friends at work whose straight kids were volunteering for that referendum. "I was like Jim is your daughter a lesbian?" and he's like "no, no she just has friends in high school that are lesbian or gay and um she wants

to be apart of it she said this". And the thing that made the difference was the youth--that sort of high school college--but I was just amazed by the highschool youth

Isabella: Yeah right on

Barbra: who came out to work on that 2005 referendum and I believe strongly that that was what made the difference. That's when the tide started to change. Where so--when was that?-- So 12 years ago when I met Carol! When I met Carol I said I'm not doing this anymore I got a girlfriend-uh all of sudden there were other people doing stuff! It was great. It felt great. Both from I'm in my sixties--I mean just to see it to see other people getting excited about it.

Isabella: Yeah! So you feel like the third wave is here?

Barbra: Yeah

Isabella: Or it's coming--Or it's here!

Barbra: Oh yeah.

Isabella: Awesome

Barbra: I do.

Isabella: Well that's really really great. Um, I know you had mentioned the Styxx a little earlier I don't know if you'd like to close with the Styxx story?

Barbra: Yeah--well the Underground was such an important part of my social life when i first came to Portland . I mean at least four nights a week we were at the Underground dancing--a little drinking. Mostly my crowd was there to dance and you know I look back now and I'm like--who would go out at 9:30 10 o'clock at night on a school night on a work night

Isabella: Yeah...

Barbra: And I'm like oh go I gotta go to bed. But yeah it was a big social gathering spot at the Underground. The owner of the Underground Randy Toothaker was very involved in my campaign for city council--great guy. And then you know--things change. Everyone wasn't going dancing all the time but you know you always knew it was there. So that's the thing about history--not even history I don't know what to call it but even if you don't participate in something, you know that it's there. And so, my best friend Penny [Rich], who was just interviewed earlier this week by someone else who was my first girlfriend in Portland, she was turning 70 last year so we wanted to have a surprise birthday party for her and I don't even--I think Penny told us that the Underground--well Sty--we we still called it the Underground even though it was called Styxx was going to close its doors forever at the end of the year and her birthday is in December. So once again I was surprised she didn't find out but someone came up with the idea, because Penny loves to dance, and so we were like let's have a party at the Underground in its last month of life. For Penny Rich who's now 70 years old--who came out in Portland at the age of fourteen. And what a way to celebrate her 70th and to sort of close down the Underground for us. So we had you know people coming out of the woods who hadn't been in Portland for years let alone the Underground, so we're like "oh my god--I remember being here blah blah blah" so we had a great great dance party there. The owner--what's his name? It was Josh um who was great. I mean he was great--he really helped us so that we didn't interfere with his business we had it early for us older folk *laughs*

Isabella: *laughs* Yeah

Barbra: We had a great great time. That how--that's how we closed down the underground.

Isabella: That's beautiful

Barbra: Yeah yeah.

Isabella: Yeah--Styxx has been such an establishment

Barbra: Yeah

Isabella: In this city for so long

Barbra: Yeah--it's sad. And Blackstone's um different feel obviously than the Underground but I remember when it opened. I don't know if Flask is considered a gay bar or not--um

Isabella: Definitely a queer bar but I don't think they self title as a lesbian anymore because they are afraid they will lose business as what i heard. How do you feel about that?

Barbra: Ehh--I'm not that close to it I wouldn't think that they would lose business. I mean I've been in there a few times when I have some friends who occasionally like to do karaoke and I've gone there to see them--do karaoke. I think to me a bunch of young people who I couldn't tell you who is LGBT and who wasn't. I mean that once again--was that what we were fighting for in the 70's & 80's and 90s. Was to have a place where everyone is out and you can't tell the difference and everyone is having a good time. That's what Flask feels like to me.

Isabella: Yeah!

Barbra: I mean the reason I know that Blackstones is gay is that I was there when it opened and I knew the owners and we used to have a lot of political fundraising events at Blackstones. But Flask on the other hand--Wendy was doing a I don't know

Isabella: --Bar Stories

Barbra: Bar Stories and she was recording and we did it at Flask so you know that feels like--well for me it felt like going to a gay bar because when it was Entree Nu it was a block from my house and I was at Entree Nu every Friday and Saturday night for a long time. So that building has always been a gay bar. Before Entree Nu it was called The Gym, it was a pool tables in there--but it was a gay bar. That was right when I first moved here. I had to collect money for MLGPA for their ad and that was really the only time I was in the Gym but shortly after I moved here it changed to Entree Nu which was a lesbian bar. So anyway, I don't go there anymore. So I don't know how it identifies.

Isabella: Yeah, I think my closing question for you is um, do you see uh the beginnings of a queer space revitalization in Portland in the near future or do you think going to continue to be sort of a thing of the past?

Barbra: Well we have the Equality Community Center. Phase one, and phase one, I mean--it's pretty small.

Isabella: Yeah

Barbra: Um you know it's offices spaces. There is drop in space where I think there's actually designated--like you can drop in anytime that there is a designated drop in time I think on Friday afternoons or something like that. What was interesting for me, I go there for meetings mostly--um I was going to a meeting and I walked in and there sat somebody who used to be on the board of MLGPA with me decades ago, he was a professor at UMF. And he was sitting in the on the couch with his laptop doing work. And I'm like "what are you doing here?" and he was like "I was in town for a meeting and I was going to meet some people for dinner and I thought I'd come here and use the wifi" and I was like "Great. that's what we are looking for. We are looking for a place where people identify that they can go to and it needs to be bigger and it needs to have more than just some office space and a couple of couches--although that's a fantastic starting point. But I do think that the double edged sword I was talking about we gotta make sure we don't go too far and I think the Equality community center is there is a way we can still connect. I mean you know what's the difference between the Italian heritage center club--i mean lots of different groups of people don't want to spend their entire lives cloistered with

everybody who's exactly like them but they want to spend some time with people that are like them. And so yeah---I think the Equality Community center for Portland and for Maine--I mean this guy is from UMF but he knows, cause we're trying to get the word out statewide that it exists and a lot of people no matter where they live in Maine at some point find themselves in Portland--not that we want it to be just Portland centric but, it is the place that is sort of the most--it's not the most central geographically but most central to things that go on. So yeah, I'm really looking forward to the day we can actually have a building not just a little office space, but a building that's the Equality Community Center and you know what--back in the 80's or early 90's there was a group of women who tried--it was called the Women's Community Project and we were trying to raise money to get a building for women, um, and you know that went on for a couple years we did a lot of events--we used to do these talent shows.

Isabella: *Laughs*

Barbra: Um where we charged money--we were trying to raise seed money for it and then I think some of the key people left or got tired or whatever--so I have that in the back of my head that failed and now I'm involved in this--which I don't think is going to fail. i think we're ready for it and we got people that really have the skills that know how to do this kind of thing. It's gonna happen.

Isabella: Yeah--well thank you so much for coming here

Barbra: Yeah

Isabella: today Barb and for sharing your story--it's been really really amazing

Barbra: Yeah!

Isabella: So thank you so much.

Barbra: I'm so glad Wendy is making this happen

Isabella: I think we all are.

END